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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BRIEFING MEMORANDUM

1/27/78

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Agree
entirely
with
comments

SEEN BY
ASST. SEC. DEAN

TO: The Deputy Secretary

FROM: ARA - John A. Bushnell, Acting

SUBJECT: Is the Argentine Navy on the Side of the Angels?

You requested our thoughts on whether Argentine Navy Commander Massera may not be one of the villains in the Argentine drama, after all.

Massera has worked actively of late to foster the notion that he is the most democratic member of the Argentine ruling junta and the one who would show the greatest respect for human rights. He has gone out of his way to befriend union leaders, Peronist politicians and Jewish leaders. He has also made it a point to tell visiting American officials that his Navy is innocent of wrongdoing because it has only a peripheral role in counter-terrorism. But this is nonsense. Massera's 1,000 man marine force is among the most active of the counter-terrorist forces. We have quite credible reports that the Navy has been responsible for repression against priests, and that the Navy Mechanics School in Buenos Aires has been used as a torture center. None of these activities could escape Massera's knowledge because of all the services in Argentina, Massera's is the most tightly controlled.

On the other hand, Massera is the most astute and ambitious of the Junta members, and smart enough to realize that a public stance on behalf of human rights will enhance his chances to become Argentina's President when he retires from the Navy (possibly late this year). It appears that Massera would like to seduce Argentina's labor unions and the Peronist Party into supporting him,

(GDS)

ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

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Exemption(s):

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much as Peron (no democrat, either) courted labor in the forties. This explains Massera's public opposition to the belt-tightening policies of the Economy Minister, who is at once anathema to labor and closely linked to Videla.

Human rights aside, Massera is, or affects to be, a jingoist. He ordered the Navy to fire against Russian trawlers last fall in an action which caused casualties and had not been approved by Videla. And he seems to have flirted with the notion of a grandstanding military action against Chile in the Beagle Channel in an effort to curry nationalist favor. He has not shared Videla's desire for a close relationship with the United States, and had privately criticized Videla's attendance at the Panama treaty signing and indicated that Argentina should not accommodate to us on the nuclear issue.

The prevailing Argentine view is that Massera is a strong leader, not usually said of Videla, but that he is unprincipled. What militates most against Massera's ambitions is that the Army, which cares little for Massera, is by far the most important military force. At all events, the image which he seems to be successfully cultivating in some quarters does not exactly accord with the facts as we know them.

We have asked Embassy Buenos Aires for further comment.

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